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SUBJECT: PACIFIC ISLAND FORUM LEADERS TAKE STRONG ACTION ON FIJI

REF: A. PORT MORESBY 11

[1](#)B. SUVA 31

CLASSIFIED BY: Leslie V. Rowe, Ambassador, U.S. Embassy Port Moresby, U.S. Department of State.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Despite early indications that Forum leaders would adhere to the conciliatory "Pacific Way" of dealing with Bainimarama, they instead issued a strong statement (Reftel A) on January 27 calling on the Interim Government to take action to hold elections and restore democracy in Fiji. They agreed to "targeted measures" which will go into effect unless Bainimarama publicly announces an election date by May 1 and holds elections by the end of the year. Targeted measures include suspension of Bainimarama and other Interim Government leaders from all Forum meetings and ineligibility of Fiji to benefit from Forum initiatives and assistance other than assistance directed toward restoring democracy. Leaders hashed out a consensus in a lengthy meeting followed by a press conference. Australian Prime Minister Rudd and New Zealand Prime Minister Key reportedly pushed effectively for the strong measures while Papua New Guinea Prime Minister Somare led other island nations in a more conciliatory approach, opposing suspension of Fiji from the Forum. In the end the hardliners prevailed. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (C) Contentious Forum Meeting: Forum leaders from Pacific Island countries met for almost four hours on January 27 in Port Moresby to review the lack of progress toward restoring democracy in Fiji. Early reports indicated that only Australia and New Zealand would push for suspension of Fiji from the Forum. A number of smaller countries (Tonga, Kiribati, and Tuvalu) opposed suspension, fearing negative repercussions to their trade and educational ties. Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu also opposed suspension. Vanuatu Prime Minister Natapei told Ambassador January 26 that the Forum had to continue to engage with Fiji. It would not make sense to suspend Fiji from the Forum as Bainimarama could then ignore pressure and stay in power for years. In his welcoming remarks at a reception on January 26, PNG Prime Minister Michael Somare tried to set the stage for the meeting. He said that the Forum leaders had gathered "to extend a helping hand to a friend in trouble" and that the Forum should emphasize inclusiveness, engagement, and solving difficulties "the Pacific Way." In Somare's presentation at the leaders' meeting, he cautioned against a confrontational approach, saying "Like the values that the Prodigal Son's story extols, the Forum should find it in its heart to forgive Fiji and help it see the ways of participatory democracy."

[1](#)3. (C) Hardliners Prevail: Somare referred to "targeted measures" envisaged under the Biketawa Declaration but said they should not be punitive. Somare and other leaders thought that the Forum should not make a decision without meeting with Bainimarama. Apparently one counter-proposal was to have a follow-up meeting on February 14 to engage in direct dialogue with Bainimarama. Only after his response would leaders then

consider giving an ultimatum. One contact characterized Somare's approach during the meeting as "pleading with the leaders" to be patient with Fiji. Somare reportedly said the Forum should give Fiji more time to move toward elections. Prime Minister Rudd apparently agreed with Somare and quickly suggested a May 1 deadline before any suspension would go into effect. Australia and New Zealand took the lead in advocating for strong measures to deal with Fiji and were backed by Forum Chairman Toke Talagi as well as the leaders of Samoa and Cook Islands.

14. (C) Forum Should Look Beyond Fiji: Reportedly, Prime Minister Rudd played a strong role in the meeting making several key points which had an impact on the outcome. In his Forum presentation and remarks at the press conference, Rudd noted that the Forum had spent the last two years discussing ways to encourage Bainimarama to return Fiji to democracy. He said that it was time to take action and move on to more pressing matters.

Rudd warned of the economic train wreck that was imminent and that Forum leaders needed to focus on how the international economic crisis would affect their countries. Rudd's points along with Bainimarama's public statement that he could be in power an additional 5-10 years and the expulsion of another editor of the Fiji Times swayed the leaders to vote for the decision which could result in Fiji's suspension from the Forum on May 1.

15. (C) Fiji High Commissioner Comments: Ambassador spoke to Fiji High Commissioner Ratu Isoa Tikoca on January 28. Bainimarama recalled him last week calling him a "collaborator" for hand-delivering Prime Minister Somare's letter asking that he re-consider his decision not to come to the Forum meeting. The High Commissioner's last official act this week was to manage the Fiji delegation at the Forum meeting. He said that Bainimarama was informed of the Forum outcome and was "madly upset". Tikoca fears the repercussions for Fiji saying that Bainimarama might now move to incorporate the People's Charter into the Constitution without having it go through Parliament. He also said that the outcome might result in Bainimarama becoming even more unstable in his decision-making. He characterized the Fiji envoy, Attorney General Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum, as "Bainimarama's closest friend" who has repeatedly told him that the time is not ripe to conduct elections. Sayed-Khaiyum reportedly did not give an effective presentation at the Forum meeting. He later complained publicly that he was unhappy with the outcome and had not been given sufficient time to present Fiji's case. (The High Commissioner is also concerned about returning to Fiji and plans to delay his return).

16. (C) Comment: PNG is known as "the land of the unexpected," and The Forum decision to take a strong stand on dealing with Bainimarama was certainly not predicted by observers -- nor favored by its host. The body language as leaders left the meeting was symbolic. Prime Minister Rudd and his delegation strode quickly by, followed a few minutes later by Prime Minister Somare who plodded along looking downcast. Prime Minister Rudd and Prime Minister Key also reportedly worked well together in advocating their position. The world economic situation certainly is of great concern in the Pacific Island countries. Prime Minister Rudd's comments on the need for the Forum leaders to change their focus from Fiji to financial issues seemed to have had an effect. It was also probably not lost on them that this warning came from Australia, currently having its own economic difficulties, the biggest bilateral donor in the Pacific. End Comment.